

DOCUMENTARY AND VERBATIM DRAMA: THE
PRACTICE AND PERFORMANCE OF RESPONSIBLE NON-
FICTION THEATER

by

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A THESIS

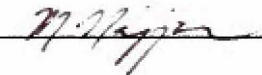
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Journalism and theater are often considered separate entities with separate goals. One is traditionally non-fiction while the other is traditionally imaginative and fictional. However, what would happen if the lines between these two art forms blurred? What if the goals of these two seemingly-unlike things were more alike than we originally thought? Documentary/verbatim theater is a genre of theater that has brought a non-fiction element to a traditionally fictional medium. It combines journalism and theater and works to incite social change, encourage community healing, and engage public empathy and awareness. Documentary and verbatim theater artists gather information from news articles, paper trails, interviews and public knowledge to tell stories about real people, places and events. They work like investigative journalists, compiling all of this found information and crafting characters, plot points, and dialogue that often become full-fledged dramatic plays.

In this thesis, I will discuss the documentary and verbatim theater of the past two decades, looking at successful productions, discussing effective and ineffective techniques, and researching theater artists that are known for their documentary work. I will look at the space where journalism and theater intersect, and I will discuss the ethical, social, and political value of creating and performing documentary and verbatim theater.

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List of Accompanying Materials

1. A recording of the staged reading of “Too Foreign for Here”

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1J3Yue8RQRe0I5R4iIulBT12ymkKvqhLm/view?usp=sharing>

Introduction: The History of Documentary Drama

Documentary drama is essentially the journalism of the stage. It is where the arts meet the mainstream media and where fact meets fiction. Documentary theater artists utilize journalistic techniques to craft a piece of essentially Non-fiction Theater, often based primarily if not entirely on real-life people, places and events. In her exploration of the popularity of the documentary form in the arts in 1920s Soviet Russia, Elizabeth Astrid Papazian defines a “documentary approach” in the arts as “the use of or reference to methods of conveying and transmitting information in a maximally transparent way, with minimal apparent interference from an authoring presence” (Papazian 2009). In a Documentary piece, the playwright is a sort of detective, following paper trails, conducting interviews, describing real-world communities and issues, and going after some semblance of objective “truth.” The result is a piece of theater that feels more like a news story than a fabricated piece of imaginative drama. The “drama” in Documentary drama comes from existing, timely, and sometimes visceral real-world conflict and the words in the piece often come directly from the “characters” that actually experienced it.

But in today’s seemingly post-fact, post-truth world, how do we know what is “real” and what isn’t? Can we somehow trust theater more than we can trust the conventional news? Does documentary theater fill some humanly ethical and experiential crack that traditional journalism cannot? Can we responsibly and ethically engage with real-world material while simultaneously using it to inspire and entertain? Or is the goal of documentary and verbatim drama ultimately to affect social change? Is that also the goal of modern-day journalism? Is documentary and verbatim drama more

problematic than it is positive, and if so, should we continue to create and perform it?

What is its place in today's modern, media-run world?

In this thesis, I hope to address these primary questions, and I hope to ultimately assert that documentary and verbatim drama, while potentially problematic, is a worthwhile pursuit, especially in our modern world. I also hope to lay out a practical set of ethical guidelines based on my background as both a journalist and a theater artist. I will demonstrate how both professions can benefit from the tenets of the other in order to produce the most responsible, poignant, and effective documentary and verbatim drama.

Documentary and verbatim theatre pieces differ from their fictional counterparts in that they are explicitly derived from truthful accounts and events. Documentary and verbatim audiences expect to see a story unfold that actually happened and they expect to see characters based on people who actually lived, and, as stated in the introduction to the book *Verbatim Verbatim*, “This claim to veracity on the part of the theater maker, however hazy or implicit, changes everything.” (Hammond and Steward 10) Because documentary plays are supposedly closer to journalism than they are to traditional theatre, “we trust and expect we are not being lied to” (Hammond and Steward 10). My thesis hinges on the idea that, “when this claim is made, theatre and journalism overlap, and, like a journalist, the dramatist must abide by some sort of ethical code if their work is to be taken seriously” (Hammond and Steward 10). According to theatre artist David Hare, “people who work in the theatre tend simply to have much less to gain from lies and spin and much more interest in being honest” (Hare 10). Hare believes that “This sort of theatre provides what journalism fails to provide, and at a time when it is sorely

needed” (Hare 10). However, this implicit trust between the audience and the playwright is also why documentary and verbatim theater is sometimes problematic. With a journalistic level of supposed truth comes a large responsibility to adhere to that truth as closely as possible. And, as Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky stated in their article *The Performance of Life: Documentary Theater and Film*, “the performance of any text is by definition performative; therefore theater can only produce an illusion of ‘documentariness’ - unlike film or literature, where this illusion may be hidden under the pile of ‘proofs of authenticity’ (Beumers and Lipovetsky 616). So, while documentary and verbatim theater operates on the premise of veracity, it is sometimes difficult to divorce the action of performance and, therefore, artistic interpretation, from the details of the real-life event that is presented in the documentary or verbatim play.

Documentary and verbatim drama deals with delicate subject matter that conventional theatre is sometimes afraid to touch. Documentary plays have central themes such as the realities of war, the effects of tragedy on a community, death, loss, grief, healing and realization. Hammond and Steward believe that documentary theatre might be better equipped to adequately handle these themes than modern journalism. “We turn to verbatim theatre because we feel that it is somehow better suited to the task of dealing with serious subject matter,” they write. “The world seems to have become a more serious place, and we want our theatre to help us understand it” (Hammond and Steward 11). This speaks to the importance and significance of a genre of theater that attempts to reconcile the factual and the artistic. Documentary and verbatim theater artists are able to present news and news-like content, but in the context of intimate

storytelling. Therefore, documentary and verbatim audiences are able to receive the same kind of enlightenment and awareness that they would receive by being informed, news-savvy citizens, but in a more in-depth and character-driven capacity, which, I believe, increases their empathy beyond simply reading a news article. Considering our current news climate, this effect could have significant implications in how we think about presenting important news-driven stories. Traditional journalism could take a page from the documentary and verbatim theater handbook in order to make its more conventional storytelling more accessible, character-driven and empathy-inducing.

The Living Newspaper

Many theater historians have traced contemporary documentary theater back to the tradition of the Living Newspaper. The Living Newspaper form was created by the Russians during the Bolshevik Revolution but was later adopted by the Federal Theater Project in New York City in the 1930s. The Federal Theater Project, a project that was part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's post-depression New Deal program, was founded to employ artists and researchers to create plays they called "Living Newspapers." Living Newspapers were based on newspaper clippings about current events that the playwrights turned into topical plays intended to inform their audience about politically and socially significant issues of the time. Hallie Flanagan, the head of the Federal Theater Project, set the staff up like a conventional "large city daily, with editor-in-chief, managing editor, city editor, reporters and copy readers" (Flanagan 1). The plays produced in this newsroom-like setting dealt with issues of housing, agriculture and

economics. They were often controversial and significantly left-leaning. Two of the Federal Theater Project's most successful Living Newspaper productions were *Triple-A Plowed Under*, a show about the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA)¹ that paid farmers to destroy their own crops, and *One-Third of a Nation*, an expose-style show about the portion of the population that was without proper housing, clothing and food after the effects of the Great Depression.

The Living Newspaper unit and the Federal Theater Project faced an untimely demise when *Triple-A Plowed Under* gave way to some suspicion of communist sympathies among the project's leaders (Cosgrove 131). When it came time for the House Committee on Un-American Activities to begin investigating government projects, the seemingly "non-essential" public projects, such as the Federal Theater Project, were the first to be reviewed. This was because "the work's value to the community was difficult to assess and cultural practices invariably operated in the contentious territory of aesthetics and politics" (Cosgrove 132). *Triple-A Plowed Under* was structured as a series of short scenes rather than a series of monologues as was previously seen in the Federal Theater Project's work and it featured some more traditional theatrical design elements, including a shadow projection of Communist Party USA leader, Earl Browder. This addition, as well as the show's presentation of various anti-US government sentiments, put an end to the Federal Theater Project, and, with its demise also came the end of the Living Newspaper form.

¹ The Agricultural Adjustment Act was a United States federal law designed to raise agricultural prices by reducing surpluses. The law made it legal for the government to buy livestock for slaughter and to pay farmers subsidies for not planting parts of their land.

While *Triple-A Plowed Under* became the clincher that eventually shut the Federal Theater Project down, the New York unit of the project also put up its fair share of other controversial pieces, including the 1937 musical *The Cradle Will Rock*. The musical, which was written by Marc Blitzstein and produced by John Houseman and a 21-year-old Orson Welles, was set against the backdrop of a steel strike. It commented on post-depression social issues and explored themes of capitalism, police brutality and the necessity of workers' unions. *The Cradle Will Rock* was controversial in that it criticized post-depression government policies that were failing to protect U.S. citizens. The musical's pro-labor and pro-union message was significantly left-leaning, and it prompted conservative members of congress to intervene, shutting down the production of *The Cradle Will Rock* on opening night of the show. In order to seek an appeal of this federal shutdown, Orson Welles travelled to Washington to plead his case. There were 14,000 tickets already sold for the run of the show and, as Welles was in Washington, "an audience of 600 mill[ed] about the Federal Theater wondering if the show [would] indeed go on" (The Federal). Since the show was being produced under the umbrella of the Works Administration Project and the Federal Theater, every aspect of the show technically belonged to the federal government. The show's original producer, John Houseman, said that when federal agents invaded the theater on opening night, they "occupied the box office, the stage and the dressing rooms to make sure that no government property was used or removed." This, he said, "included scenery, musical scores, costumes, actors' underwear, and our leading man's toupee" (The Cradle). Ultimately, the creative team behind *The Cradle Will Rock* was forced to deliberately defy the federal government by moving the show to an alternate venue. This piece of

well-known theater lore is just one of the many instances of inherent discord between the United States government and theater that threatens the status quo, and it is also fundamental to contemporary verbatim and documentary drama. The Federal Theater Project's willingness to challenge political and social issues with their work helped to blaze the trail for contemporary documentary and verbatim theater artists to do the same.

Historically, one of the primary arguments against government-funded arts programs is that taxpayers should not be required to support artistic projects and pursuits that they disagree with. Since theater is often inherently political, it is difficult for government-funded theater to sustain itself over a long period of time, as taxpayers often become incensed when they realize that their money may be going towards producing theater that does not align with their political beliefs and, similarly, politicians are often threatened by government-funded theater projects creating content that directly defies the status quo. As a result, many government-funded theater projects in the U.S. have been promptly shut down after their inception. When The Federal Theater Project decided to produce *Triple-A Plowed Under*, the anti-US government and pro-Communism statements in the show were enough to stop government funding and shut the program down, thus putting an end to the original Living Newspaper form.

1960s Political Theater

Another significant development in the history of what we now think of as modern documentary and verbatim drama was the political street theater of the 1960s. This movement included companies like Bread and Puppet Theatre, the Living Theatre

and El Teatro Campesino, which all grew to popularity during the Civil Rights Era and the anti-Vietnam protests. This type of invasive, public theater, which is widely depicted in movies and television shows about the 1960s such as in the 2017 Beatles film musical *Across the Universe*. The street theater of the 1960s was a form of aggressive, political theater that varied from the more traditional Living Newspaper style, not just in its presentation but in its content.

Bread and Puppet Theatre, a company based on a farm in northern Vermont, popularized street theater, using massive human-operated puppets as the focal point of their work. Historically, the company has participated in anti-war and anti-nuclear marches and is known for blurring the lines between protest and performance. The founder of Bread and Puppet Theater, Peter Schumann, prides himself on his company's ability to comment on social and political issues through work that was "marked by their political moralism in two important respects: its concern with domestic issues, the home front, and its primitivism of technique and morality" (Goldensohn 71). The company's work, which actively remains a presence in the contemporary theater scene, was uniquely ritualistic and experimental. Their work handles morality in a black and white, childlike way, but, as theater scholar Barry Goldensohn described it:

"This is not to say that it is a theater for children, but rather that the medium has its roots in the inner lives we carry with us from childhood: the structure of primitive cognitive styles; explosive psychic material composed of fantasies of power and helplessness, of incomprehensible forces, of magical fulfillment of wishes; of human animals and animal humans; of giants and dolls; and above all the sense of disparity between the puppet and its human role. One is seized by

one's childhood. This is apparent in the way Schumann alternates simple moral absolutism with perceptual ambiguity, uses satiric ingénues with a child's vision of moral issues, and characterizes stylized and exaggerated gestures, and in general, by the freedom with which the mysterious and playful enter this world” (Goldensohn 75).

Ultimately, the Bread and Puppet Theater took performance to the streets in a way that had not previously been seen. They created full-fledged experiences for their audiences, experimenting with non-traditional form and challenging the social and political status quo in a way that was fundamental to future politically-charged theater forms, including documentary and verbatim theater.

Similarly, The Living Theatre is a company that, since its inception in the 1950s, has become known as “the most radical, uncompromising, and experimental group in American theatrical history.” (Tytell xi) The Living Theatre produced plays primarily on the principle that “there could be no separation between art and life,” and the company was “eager to use theatre as a platform for a kind of dissent traditionally smothered by the complex organism we know as modern society.” (Tytell xii) This ideology is also integral to documentary and verbatim theater, a genre which has historically worked to expose injustice and fight against the institution.

El Teatro Campesino, a company founded in 1965 by Luis Valdez, also demonstrates one of the most important aspects of documentary and verbatim theater: a cultural focus. The work that came out of El Teatro Campesino (which literally translates to ‘the farmer’s theater’) was aimed at a “less cultured audience of workers and farmers” and dramatized the “various events of everyday life of the Mexican

minorities, with rich, vibrant colors and ironic metaphors of both political and cultural value” (Buttice 1). El Teatro Campesino was inspired by the European Commedia dell’Arte form of theater, which historically relied on thematic and character-driven stereotypes to forward the plot, and they frequently used this form to systematically subvert and criticize modern day stereotypes about Mexican-American laborers. Their work was also heavily influenced by the German Theater of the 1920s, including German Expressionism and Brechtian Theater and the Mexican Theater of the 1920s, including the “carpa” vaudeville tradition and Federico Garcia Lorca, a 20th century Spanish poet and dramatist who was arrested and murdered at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War and whose work was heavily inspired by Spanish folklore and history. The principle of appealing to and characterizing the everyman that is present in El Teatro Campesino’s work is also present in modern documentary and verbatim drama. Most of today’s effective documentary and verbatim pieces seek to demonstrate the value of everyday lives, even within larger, more public historical events or times of crisis. They also seek to eliminate stereotypes, letting characters speak for themselves and become full-fledged, living beings rather than just one small, niche part of a larger story. In documentary and verbatim theater, the story becomes about the everyday, and by exposing the everyday, the overarching social issue is also exposed. This kind of focus on the individual perspective can be drawn directly back to companies like El Teatro Campesino.

Chapter 2: The Laramie Project

One of the most significant events in the history of contemporary documentary theater was the premiere of *The Laramie Project* in 2000. The Tectonic Theater project, a coalition of experimental theater artists in New York City composed the play over a two-year period lead by playwright Moisés Kaufman. The play examines the death of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man in Laramie, Wyoming who was brutally beaten and murdered by two of his peers. The community of Laramie was greatly affected by this tragedy and Shepard's death went on to become an exemplary hate crime used to fuel countrywide education about tolerance and acceptance. The event was tragic, emotional, and politically charged, and, in short, was the perfect subject matter for the first contemporary documentary theater piece.

Kaufman and his team composed the show based on over 200 interviews they conducted with the citizens of Laramie, Wyoming, both with people who were directly involved with the victim and crime and with ancillary citizens who could fill in the gaps. The resulting production blends together dramatizations of those interviews and reenactments of the actual events of the murder and is an emotionally and politically challenging piece of drama that brings up questions of homophobia, LGBTQ+ rights, senseless violence, and life in middle America.

Today, *The Laramie Project* is one of the most widely performed plays across the country. According to the Tectonic Theater Project, by 2014 the show had been seen by more than 30 million people, and since then, the show has continued to be performed on college campuses, at community theaters, and in professional contexts. Tectonic Theater's website says that "*The Laramie Project* portrayed one town in America at the

end of the millennium. In doing so, it also managed to capture something profoundly American, something about social injustices, about beliefs, about idiosyncrasies. So while it told the story of one American town, it also spoke to America as a whole” (Tectonic Theater).

However, while *The Laramie Project* opened up a national conversation about LGBTQ+ rights and hate crimes in the United States and set down the groundwork for modern-day documentary and verbatim theater techniques, the show’s veracity was eventually questioned and the playwright received pushback from professional journalists who hoped to uncover the objective, clear “truth” behind the murder. One such journalist was Stephen Jimenez, author of *The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths about the Murder of Matthew Shepard*. Like the members of Tectonic Theater, Jimenez made it his journalistic mission to journey to Laramie, Wyoming to find out what really happened to Matthew Shepard in 1998, and his book is the result of a decade of conducting interviews, following paper trails, examining law transcripts, and digging deeply into Shepard’s past.

The book aims to disprove the version of Shepard’s death that was put forth by *The Laramie Project*, claiming that Shepard’s death may not have been a hate crime at all, but, rather, the result of a crystal meth deal gone wrong. Jimenez asserts that Shepard was involved with some illegal activity and that he was, in fact, a meth user. He also asserts that the two men charged with killing Shepard may have been his friends and that one of them might have even been Shepard’s lover. Presumably, Jimenez employed similar information-gathering techniques to Kaufman and the other members of the Tectonic Theater Project. He might have even interviewed some of the

same people and looked at some of the same documents that Kaufman and his team did. So why, then, did he propagate such a different kind of story?

Jimenez's book was met with outrage and anger, especially among the LGBTQ+ community. "*The Book of Matt*," wrote Advocate Magazine contributor Neal Broverman in an op-ed piece in 2014, "digs up Matt's past like he's Laura Palmer from *Twin Peaks*, with accusations of drug-dealing and a possible sexual relationship with one of his killers. Jimenez is ostensibly getting the facts and showing it to the world as a service of the truth. But to me, it feels lurid and cruel. Matt never agreed to be a public figure; he never ran for office or appeared on a reality show. I guess being beaten senseless and left to die is consent enough to allow writers to denigrate your reputation and victimize you again" (Broverman 1).

Overall, Jimenez was similarly criticized for claiming to dare to tell the truth of Shepard's murder after so much time had gone by and the national narrative had already been formed by newsmen and by *The Laramie Project*. Alyssa Rosenberg, another of Jimenez's critics, wrote in a piece for ThinkProgress, a news website under the umbrella of the Center for American Progress Action Fund, that "If you want to prove a controversial theory about a story that's become deeply embedded in accepted history, and to suggest that you have more integrity than your critics, it helps to impeccably document your claims" (Rosenberg 1). She then goes on to insist that Jimenez neglected to do his journalistic duty in appropriately and accurately sourcing his claims and instead caused the reader to repeatedly question his credibility. Jimenez even gave a sort of veracity disclaimer at the beginning of his apparently-non-fiction book, saying "Though this is a work of nonfiction journalism, I have occasionally employed methods

that are slightly less stringent to recreate the dialogue of characters—words I did not personally hear; nor could the characters themselves recall every word exactly from memory. But my intention throughout has been to remain faithful to the actual characters and events as they really happened” (Jimenez 2).

Fundamentally, what Jimenez did in *The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths about the Murder of Matthew Shepard* is not all that different from what the Tectonic Theater Project did with *The Laramie Project*. Both entities conducted interviews over a considerable length of time, utilized pre-existing news stories, and combed through court records. However, *The Laramie Project* was widely accepted as the “true” story of Matthew Shepard’s murder while *The Book of Matt* was met with doubt and widespread cultural and political backlash. Some might argue that Kaufman and his crew got the “real” story because they got there first, or because they, like Broverman suggests, showed some inherent respect for Shepard as a human being rather than openly sifting through his potentially sordid past, simply looking for controversy. The kind of documentary drama techniques that Kaufman and his team used to create *The Laramie Project* mirrors what modern-day journalists call “slow news.” They took their time in collecting the information, showed compassion in dealing with people who had just undergone a tragedy, and paid attention to fine detail and nuance. In contrast, the kind of journalism that Jimenez did has been likened to ambulance chasing. Maybe the inherent form and built-in artistry of documentary and verbatim theater encourages slow news practices. Maybe theater artists are simply more empathetic than traditional journalists looking to make a quick buck. Maybe, as *Verbatim Verbatim* asserts, theater artists simply have less to gain from tweaking the details of their stories. Maybe they

show more reverence for the people and are therefore more inclined to find the objective “truth.” After all, all good stories hinge on the people who are part of them.

Essentially, this dichotomy brings me to the crux of my thesis. If *The Laramie Project* is somehow regarded as “better” journalism than some of the more conventional journalism done about the Matthew Shepard murder, what does this imply about documentary and verbatim drama? Was *The Laramie Project* better received because it was presented as non-fictional art rather than artistic non-fiction? Was Kaufman given some leeway on the ultimate “truth” of his story because people saw it as art rather than journalism? Does the often politically-charged nature of documentary drama sway our thinking about a play’s veracity because the stories they tell are often important and ground-breaking?

Chapter 3: London Road

Expanding on the principles that the Tectonic Theatre and The Laramie Project cast and production crew discovered with their foray into verbatim drama, playwright Alecky Blythe took the established rules of verbatim and documentary theater and she explored the boundaries of the genre even further, expanding into the world of musical theater. For her work, *London Road*, Blythe drew inspiration from the horrific Ipswich murders which took place in 2006. On a single street in Ipswich, Suffolk, five women were murdered over the course of a few months. All of the women were prostitutes and their killer, Steve Wright, has become known as the Ipswich Ripper. Blythe's musical was originally inspired by an earlier piece she was working on called *The Girlfriend Experience*, in which she interviewed a group of prostitutes about their lives and experiences. During production of *The Girlfriend Experience*, the actors were fed the verbatim lines through earpieces in the tradition of Playback Theater, a production technique which prizes the intersection of theatrical improvisation and traditional verbatim theater. This Playback Theater technique creates an impromptu, natural, unrehearsed feeling. While Blythe was working on *The Girlfriend Experience*, her subjects encouraged her to investigate the situation in Ipswich. She then travelled, interviewed a handful of concerned citizens at a marketplace, and returned to her work on *The Girlfriend Experience*. It wasn't until the killer was caught and the trial was set that Blythe thought to return to Ipswich to take advantage of the plethora of fascinating verbatim material that was waiting for her. The London Road community was in turmoil following the murders, and the mixture of fear, upheaval, and the capacity to rebuild was a verbatim playwright's dream; however, the project did not truly come

together until Blythe was introduced to composer Adam Cork in 2007. Together, Blythe and Cork endeavored to put Blythe's interviews to music, eventually creating the revolutionary and divisive piece, *London Road*.

The most significant and most unique feature of Blythe's verbatim piece is that it is, truly, verbatim. Each and every word, um, but and stutter were taken precisely from Blythe's interviews. For example, in the first scene of the musical, the character called Ron says, "Yeah Helen is the secretary of the / (Beat.) Neighbourhood Watch committee. I'm the chairman (Beat.) it – we were **overwhelmed** with (Beat.) people comin' wantin' ta join (Beat.) because a the (Beat.) murders. An'then of course the err (Pause.) Julie is a (Beat.) **keen** gardener – you've – seen her window boxes obvisly. (Pause.) She suggested this at one of the big meetings – an' she said 'Let's 'ave a "London Road in Bloom" competition' (Beat.) and we all said 'Yeah, that'll be nice'" (Blythe 2).

On the first page of the script, Blythe addresses her specific annotation choices, writing that, "Songs and sung text are indicated with italics. Emphasis and stress are indicated with bold. A forward slash in the text (/) indicates the point at which the next speaker interrupts," and, "Inconsistencies in spelling and grammar are deliberate and indicate idiosyncrasies in the speech and delivery of the characters" (Blythe 1). In this regard, *London Road* is one of just a handful of truly verbatim theatrical pieces.

However, as the The Los Angeles Times said in a 2016 review of the film adaptation, "*London Road* went one step further [than traditional verbatim theater], spinning its characters' words into song and heralding a new genre: the true-crime avant-garde musical" (Chang). According to Adam Cork, Blythe's verbatim theater

approach differs from other pioneers in the field in that, for her, the interviews are the most important part.

“She doesn’t approach verbatim in the way that a playwright like Richard Norton-Taylor, who has done a lot of work at the Tricycle Theatre in London might approach it,” Cork said in an interview with *Civilians* composer Michael Friedman, “He’ll take transcripts from tribunals and court cases and things like that and edit that text into something play-like, which actors then read off the page and supply their own interpretive dimension. Alecky starts with interviews and stays with the audio from those interviews... And we did a lot of that work together. So crucially, with her approach to verbatim, it’s as much — if not more — to do with the how of what is said as it is to do with the what” (Freidman).

Freidman said that, in order to set the piece to music, Blythe’s verbatim approach had to seep into his own process. “So you’re really focusing in on those little hesitations, the ‘ums’ and the ‘ahs’ that occur in natural, everyday, spontaneous speech,” Cork said.

“I took an increasingly, almost fascistic approach to my transcription, in the sense that it got more and more detailed and more and more true to what I was hearing. Listening over and over again to these spoken lines, and really nailing the pitch of each syllable. And really nailing, I wouldn’t say the rhythm, but something that reads as that rhythm within my tempo and mood of choice in a

true-to-life way. And what I ended up with was very, very complex lines, without much in the way of internal repetition” (Freidman).

As a result of this process, the musical lines in *London Road* read much more like Gilbert and Sullivan-esque patter songs than traditional melodies. They bend and lilt with what seems to be natural speech pattern, even though the characters are singing, and each characters’ musical voice is distinct and often in line with their non-singing voice.

Blythe’s work has contributed new layers of nuance and complexity to the genre of documentary and verbatim theater. By focusing primarily on the precise pattern and intonation of her subjects’ speech, Blythe is able to flesh out truly vibrant and real-sounding relatable characters, which, in turn, make the world in which they live feel more full, complete and true to life. This truly verbatim form helps Blythe give an authentic voice to the voiceless in *London Road* and the musical exposes a side of the Ipswich murders that was otherwise unexplored. The show investigates the small, individual lives affected by the hugely-publicized murders and trial and demonstrates community was able to tell their own story and, through their interviews with Blythe, experience community catharsis and healing one of the primary goals of documentary and verbatim theater. Because of Blythe’s commitment to the individual characters affected by this tragedy, the *London Road*.

Chapter 4: Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom

Gillian Slovo and Victoria Brittain's verbatim play, *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* is another prime example of modern, post-9/11 documentary and verbatim theater. Similar to Blythe's *London Road*, the play is primarily constructed from interviews with four subjects, all of whom are British Muslims and previous detainees at the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay. However, unlike *London Road*, *Guantanamo* is also padded with statements from secondary sources and subjects, including testimonies from family members, public officials and attorneys. To compose *Guantanamo*, in addition to conducting primary interviews, Slovo and Brittain collected and followed legal paper trails and sourced information from public statements and trials. The result is a piece that, much like a traditional journalistic article, synthesizes the most salient aspects of an incredibly complicated and politically divisive moment in history, making it easily-digestible for a common audience and exposing the dark underbelly of post-9/11 U.S. detention practices in Cuba.

Guantanamo capitalizes on two of the most important components of documentary and verbatim theater: the importance of audience interaction and the inherent theatricality of tragedy. Most documentary and verbatim pieces are inspired by a difficult event that has occurred in a community or in history, but the ensuing conversations that these events inspire are often of more interest to a verbatim or documentary playwright than the events themselves. Playwrights see these events as catalysts for important social and political conversations, and they often compose their pieces in order to become a permanent part of the conversations. Whether it is a gruesome hate crime, like in *The Laramie Project*, a string of serial murders, like in

London Road, or a controversial governmental response to the rise of terrorism in the United States, documentary and verbatim plays expose and get people talking about systematic issues in society. However, while *The Laramie Project* helped to start the national conversation about LGBTQ+ rights and *London Road* helped to humanize the innocent bystanders affected by highly-publicized murder trials, neither show exhibits the kind of widespread journalistic checks and balances against governmental policy like *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*. By presenting the “action” of the play in the form of long, verbatim monologues often delivered directly to the audience, the audience becomes part of the conversation. Because of this one-on-one engagement with the audience, “The play therefore corresponds to Emily Mann’s notion of the ‘theatre of testimony,’ in that it moves away from the creation of a single protagonist and toward the creation of a communal voice that counters ‘official’ truths” (Hesford 35). The collection of testimonies and the synthesis of public statements and official documents interact to form the conversation rather than to create it.

Slovo and Brittain’s play is also unique in that the primary subjects are the victims themselves, which, while operating on the assumption that tragedy is inherently theatrical, creates a “straightforward exposition” which is “a departure from the reproduction of spectacular victim narratives that dominate popular discourse” (Hesford 35). *Guantanamo* explores themes of torture and terror without having to explicitly show or dramatize them, and, “Although there is no direct action and character development is sparse, the individual testimonial letters accumulate and begin to create a polyphonic subjectivity, which seeks to cultivate within audiences a critical subjectivity and a sense of collective rhetorical witnessing, without a public

photographic record of abuse” (Hesford 35). In this way, *Guantanamo* aims to be more journalistic than theatrical. It does not aim to entertain or enlighten so much as it does to inform. And, ideally, given all of the necessary and pertinent factual information, the audience is subsequently armed with enough detail to make up their own minds.

This is also the aim of traditional journalism. Journalism, at its roots, exists as a conversation between the powers that be and the average reader. The journalist serves as a vessel through which information about events, policies and social upheaval flows; however, desirable journalism is also unbiased. Ideally, an entirely unbiased journalist would include the complete spectrum of perspectives on any given subject in their stories, and while this is rarely possible even in print and more traditional forms, it seems much less possible on the stage. One of the main criticisms of *Guantanamo*, even with its aim to simply present information rather than framing it, is that the play presents “much of the same one-sided discourse” throughout (Claycomb). It is true that, when a playwright sets out to compose a piece of documentary and verbatim theater, it can be expected that they would approach it primarily from one compelling angle, but the ability to flex and change the “point” or inherent moral of the piece as more information is uncovered is integral to good journalism and to good documentary and verbatim play writing.

In a 2006 review of the Studio Theater production of *Guantanamo*, theater critic Ryan Claycomb concluded that, ultimately, the piece’s redemption is found in its testimonials. “In contrast to the official doctrinaire,” he writes, “the detainees themselves created both the strongest pathos and the greatest cause for action. As the mentally deteriorating Moazzam Begg, Kaveh Haerian offered a harrowing portrait of

the human elided by human rights abuses. And as the jittery, colloquial Ruhai Ahmed, Nafees Hamid presented a vivid image of youthful energy and naive optimism crushed by detention...” Ultimately, as is evidenced by Calcomb’s review and by the overall reception of *The Laramie Project*, *London Road*, and countless other documentary and verbatim works, where documentary and verbatim theater truly triumphs is in its characters. Testimony is a powerful driving force behind the efficacy of documentary and verbatim theater, and veracious testimony, when used correctly, can spur audiences on to action far better than any *New York Times* front page. If the goal of a documentary or verbatim piece is audience reflection and eventual action, testimony may be the most poignant and pivotal component. And if this testimony can be recorded precisely from the source without any questions of fabrication or framing, it may be even more effective. Sometimes the best and most accurate overarching narratives are crafted from precise, individual stories, and documentary and verbatim theater offers a unique opportunity to explore this phenomenon.

Chapter 5: The Researcher as Playwright

When I set out to research a genre as nuanced and specific as documentary drama, I quickly began to realize that the only way I could truly understand the plight of the verbatim and documentary playwright was to become one, or, to try my best to become one. Playwrights who work in this genre have a uniquely daunting task. They must accurately represent real people with real lives, problems and experiences. Because of this, they are often presented with more moral and logistical responsibility than traditional playwrights. The characters these playwrights write about are not of their own creation. They are not fictional and boundless. Instead, they are tightly held within the confines of real life. They have defined parameters and form, and the people who serve as source material for a verbatim or documentary playwright have expectations and are capable of retaliation if they feel they have been mistreated or that their stories have been inaccurately told. For each of us, our identity is one of the most, if not the most important thing. Our likeness, our stories, our struggles. All of these things are precious and they cannot truly be re-created. Therefore, when a subject enters into a contract with a verbatim or documentary playwright, they are essentially defying natural human instinct. They are allowing another person to attempt to re-create them. And, with this, comes a litany of interpersonal, moral and political challenges that are unique to the verbatim and documentary playwright.

For my documentary play, I decided to foray into a subject matter that I felt comfortable handling in a responsible way. I wanted to write about something I understood and had experienced, and I wanted to ensure that I related to my subjects on some level. When I took all of this into account, I decided to write about the study

abroad trip I was a part of this past summer, during which myself and twelve other students from various backgrounds and disciplines travelled to London, Paris, Dublin and Oxford over the course of six weeks.

To write the play, I conducted interviews with five of my fellow travelers. I carried out a handful of individual interviews with each of my subjects, during which we discussed their personal feelings and reactions to the trip, and a handful of group interviews, during which we all gathered together and I posed questions to the group which then spurred further dialogue and discussion. These group interviews often led me to discover the themes that I would develop in the play, while the personal interviews gave me more in-depth and character-specific content. I recorded each of the group interviews and took notes during the individual interviews. I then went back over the group interviews and pulled out stories and content that stood out to me, either dictating them verbatim and sometimes editing for clarity, or taking the general idea of a story and filling in dialogue based on what the subject relayed to me. I also used the journal that I kept throughout the trip as a supplementary source, and I used the journal entries, poems and sketches of my subjects as inspiration.

Throughout the process of writing my play, I ran into a lot of the same problems that I imagine the verbatim playwrights I have researched faced. I had to make choices about what kind of content to include, how to represent my subjects, which themes to riff off of, how much to share with my subjects during the process, if and when to change quotes, and if and when to add my own narrative bias. In this section, I will attempt to delineate in further detail some of my most significant decisions and findings throughout the process of writing my play.

The Format

The experience of study abroad is inherently dramatizational. When we study abroad, we experience otherness, disorientation, an expansion of perspective, joy, grief, loss, homesickness, inspiration, nationalism, fatigue, and we, more often than not, are able to tie these complex emotions to specific experiences or instances. The process of debriefing after a perspective-altering experience like a study abroad trip is often one of storytelling, of picking out the highlights and emotional peaks and valleys in order to sum up the experience as a whole.

That is what I was hoping to harness in my play. I was hoping to collect stories and realizations that were innately relatable and revelatory, and I knew that the content would lend itself well to the most traditional documentary/verbatim format: a series of monologues and vignettes. This format, through the use of short scenes and monologues, slowly reveals the personalities of a handful of otherwise loosely-defined characters and simultaneously brings to light the significance of the events being covered in the play. It also minimizes playwright interference by allowing the words and stories to exist as they are, even if they sometimes do not feel finished or fully fleshed out. It seems to me that the attempt to create a cohesive narrative from a handful of loosely-related stories and accounts is where verbatim playwrights sometimes get into trouble in their work. For example, perhaps if the creators of *The Laramie Project* hadn't tried to dramatize the actual events of the murder, they may not have been criticized quite so heavily for supposedly spinning and revising the story. The narrative that the Tectonic Theater Project created with *The Laramie Project* has become synonymous with the narrative of the Matthew Shepard case, and, for better or worse,

the two cannot be separated. With my play, though the stakes were much smaller, I attempted to avoid this documentary theater pitfall by keeping the stories that my subjects recounted mostly separate from one another. However, from a theatrical standpoint, I will admit that my script could benefit from an overarching plot if I were to ever produce it professionally. Unfortunately, vignettes only have so much theatrical value, and, as my play is now, it lends itself more to a minimalist set, small venue, and low production value. If I wanted to ramp up the theatrical qualities of the play, I think it would also need a cohesive, or at least semi-cohesive, plot.

Journalist v. Artist

There is an idea in modern society that journalists should be ruthless. When someone says “journalist,” the descriptors that often come to mind are words like “tough” and “resilient” and “doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.” In the book *Interviewing: The Oregon Method*, late University of Oregon journalism professor Alex Tizon describes “feeling like a jackal” when out on an assignment covering a young girl’s mysterious death. “What exactly is the correct way to conduct yourself in the presence of inconsolable grief?” Tizon asks, describing watching the young girl’s father break down in tears as he tried to ask “questions no considerate person should ask” (Tizon 130).

Following the idea of a journalist “feeling like a jackal” in high-stress or high-grief situations in which they are third-party observers, Tizon describes the instances in which, even while simply doing his job, while knowing that he was following orders, showing respect to the extent that he could, and simply trying to serve the journalistic

integrity of a story, he felt wrong for being and for calling himself a “journalist.” He describes an instance when he covered the private funeral of a notorious gangster in Seattle. During the funeral, one of the gangster’s friends asked him who he was and what he was doing there. “I work for a newspaper,” he said, and the “dead man’s mother looked at [him] plaintively and said, ‘You’re disrespecting my son. You’re disrespecting his family. Do you know that, sir?’” (Tizon 131). In retrospect, Tizon says, he wholeheartedly agrees with the dead man’s mother. “I had trespassed on a family’s private moment,” he writes. “I added to the affliction. To this day I don’t feel sympathy for the dead guy, and if you knew what he had done in his life you wouldn’t either. But his mother, his brothers and sisters, his childhood friends... they deserved sympathy, respect. They had the right to grieve without an uninvited outsider taking notes on them” (Tizon 131).

Tizon’s conclusion in this chapter is that, while the temptation to feel like a jackal as a journalist is sometimes strong, it is an inevitable part of what journalists do. Journalists, by definition, are story-seeking. They receive assignments from an editor and they often do not have the time or the effort to expend on thinking about how their presence, how their story-seeking tactics, might affect the characters in the stories they are trying to tell. Often, conventional journalists are faced with the same challenges as documentary and verbatim playwrights. But could a playwright, a theater artist, someone with an implied, intrinsic sense of empathy and a deep respect for humanity and the human condition, ever be considered a jackal? That is the central question that I wanted to explore in crafting my own documentary work.

As a trained journalist and theater artist, I could have approached the play in one of two ways. I could be ruthlessly information-seeking in the way that modern-day journalists might have to be in order to excavate their stories. Or, I could lead with my empathetic brain. I could present myself as an artist, first and foremost, and I could let the information come to me. However, as I suppose I expected from the beginning of this process, neither of these schools of thought, systems or techniques are effective entirely on their own. I was ultimately the most successful when I was able to seamlessly weave these two techniques together. My relentless, information-seeking brain and my empathetic, artistic brain had to coexist. There was no way around it. And the resulting content was a mixture of semi-spun, poignant social commentary and literal, factual interpretations of the information I received. And, sometimes, the most poignant parts were not spun or interpreted by me at all. I think this is the name of the game with documentary and verbatim theater, and this explains why it is such a delicate, controversial, important medium. It both informs and enlightens. It educates and entertains. As a playwright, it requires a delicate amalgamation of a logical, truth-seeking brain and an artistic, socially-conscious brain. That is why, after completing my research and writing my play, I believe that the field of documentary and verbatim theater could be improved if documentary playwrights were given more formal journalism and media ethics training. That way, even if a playwright is not also a journalist, they can learn to better balance their political, artistic and social intentions with an unbiased, media-savvy objective.

Yes, But I Don't Want to Share

Throughout the interviewing process, one of my largest hurdles was this quote: “Yes, I do, but I don’t want to share.” At least half a dozen times, the interviews were going exceptionally well before being stopped short. I was asking questions, my subjects were laughing and sharing openly, but then, suddenly, I would inadvertently hit a nerve. At those moments, I ran into a moral dilemma. I could either push my subject further or respect their wishes and allow them to move on. And both courses of action have their own set of consequences. If I pushed, I risked losing my subjects’ trust and friendship and I might have increased the chances of retaliation from them in the future; however, if I let them stay quiet, I risked losing a prime opportunity for character development and storytelling in my play, thus potentially losing an opportunity for the play to become more nuanced, full, and poignant. On the surface, neither of those consequences are worth risking, and the play would be better off if my subjects were simply honest and open with me at every turn, but this is the plight of the documentary and verbatim playwright.

Inherently, as playwrights, we are drawn to drama. Emotionally significant events, even if they are traumatic in some way, are intrinsically more dramatic than commonplace, everyday occurrences, so, whether we want to or not, we push for them. Or, our instinct is to push for them. For me, the biggest challenge in hearing “Yes, I do, but I don’t want to share” was knowing that there was a story there that was actively being withheld from me. That is when my inner journalistic jackal struggled to break free, and I had to decide whether or not to fight it.

“Nobody is going to know that these quotes came from you,” I said in one instance. “It will really help me if you share.” In this case, my plea did get my subject talking, and while she still did not reveal the whole story, that interview yielded me the poem that ended up inspiring the title of my play. Sometimes pushing just a little bit harder was enough to get my subjects talking; however, the pressures associated with these apparent stand-still situations can be problematic. As in any interviewing situation, you always risk pushing too hard and making the subject feel guilty for withholding information. It can sometimes become personal, and the subject can sometimes feel as if they owe the interviewer an answer. Unfortunately, I found that this is a common occurrence in the creation of documentary and verbatim theater, but I believe that it is as common of an occurrence in conventional journalism. The interviewer/interviewee relationship operates with a tenuous balance and with more sensitive content comes more potential for that balance to tip. I, unfortunately, encountered this throughout the play-writing process, but some of the more morally compromising situations made me empathize with the playwrights I have studied. There is no getting around the inevitable clash of agendas between an interviewer who needs to be told sensitive content in order to improve their story and an interview who wants to withhold sensitive information in order to protect themselves.

The Aftermath

Once the play was finished, it was difficult for me to decide how I was going to expose my subjects to it for the first time. It was important to me that each of the women had a chance to interact with the piece in some way before I published it, but I

did not want them to have too much access to it. I was worried they would try to change it before it even had a chance to see the light of day in its original form, and I was fairly certain that the content that I included in the piece was not quite controversial enough to cause conflict.

In order to circumvent some of the issues I imagined would be associated with my subjects having full early access to the script, I instead decided to invite them to the staged reading to hear the play for the first time. I knew that there was risk involved with this decision, but I truly thought that it was the best way to expose my subjects to the piece. And, for the most part, it went very well. I am sure it was uncomfortable for the women to hear their own words spoken back to them by actresses, but, generally, the piece was well-received. They seemed to enjoy having their stories and memories told, and they seemed to experience a kind of catharsis through hearing their own words and feelings recited by actors. While this catharsis cannot be quantifiably measured, I believe it is an integral and unavoidable part of the documentary and verbatim theater experience, and I believe that it is one of the genre's most beneficial features. The potential for healing and emotional resolution is just one of the things that sets the genre apart from other theatrical pursuits, and, throughout my research and the playwriting experience, I discovered that this healing can be far greater than the healing that can result from more traditional journalism practices. Through storytelling, people find peace. And what better way to tell a story than orally, in front of an audience, as a shared and communal experience?

Unfortunately, with this potential for healing and catharsis also comes a potential for resurfacing trauma and emotional triggers. While watching the reading,

one of my subjects was made a little too uncomfortable by the play, and she ended up sending me an email asking me to remove one of the scenes. That put me in the most difficult moral dilemma of all. I felt like I owed her the respect of considering her feelings, and, given that she took her own time to interview with me and was willing to give me her stories in the first place, it was difficult for me to know that she was upset by my play. She told me that the particular content was “triggering,” and she said it would be very uncomfortable for her to know that it was out there in the world, even if she herself would never interact with it again. I labored over what to tell her, but, ultimately, I had to tell her that I couldn’t and I wouldn’t remove the scene.

In this instance, I thought about what a journalist would do. The Ethical Journalism Network suggests in its handbook that a journalist ask themselves a series of questions before forging any relationship with an interview subject. The questions are: “1) Have I clarified with my source the basis of our relations and have I been fully transparent about my intentions? 2) Have I taken care to protect the source – for instance if they are a young person or someone in vulnerable circumstances – to ensure they are aware of the potential consequences of publication of the information they give? 3) Am I confident the source fully understands the conditions of our interview and what I mean by off-the-record, on background, not-for attribution, or other labels? 4) If a source asks for conditions before agreeing to an interview, what are my limits? 5) Would I pay for a source’s expenses related to an interview? What legitimate costs could be paid? 6) Would I agree to provide legal representation?” (Law 2017).

To the extent that this list of questions was relevant to me, I do think I covered all of my bases. Before beginning my interviews, I fully explained my intentions, telling

my subjects that I was writing a play about travel and the young female experience. I even suggested a handful of themes I imagined I would explore in the play. I also explained and defined documentary and verbatim theater and told the girls that the bulk of my play would ideally be verbatim. I took care to keep my subjects as anonymous as they wished to remain, changing names, ages and other details when they came up in the play, making it nearly impossible to pinpoint scenes, specific circumstances, or words to my individual subjects. In order to make sure that my subjects understood the conditions of my interviews, I began each interview by saying that I would be recording each session and that anything said during the session may be used in the play, either verbatim or to inspire themes and stories. For the most part, when a subject truly did not wish to share, they did not, knowing that whatever was said would be fair game.

Ultimately, I think I took care of my subjects and I also believe that I clearly communicated my intentions for the project. Because of this, I feel confident in my decision to keep the scene in question in my play. Journalists very rarely remove quotes once the story is published, and, because my goal in writing this play was to combine artistic skill sets with traditional journalistic skill sets, I went with my journalistic gut on this one and I do not regret it. I am proud of the work I have done on the play, and I have to stand by it, even though it might have made someone uncomfortable. If I continue on in the world of documentary and verbatim theater, I am sure to encounter similar, if not worse, ethical dilemmas, and I believe that, as long as I uphold my journalistic integrity, I am also given the right to uphold my artistic integrity.

Chapter 6: Final Thoughts

When I set out to begin this project, I had three primary research questions in mind. 1) Where is the line between journalist and artist? 2) Where is the line between fact and fiction? and, 3) Can we ethically engage with real-world material while simultaneously using it to affect change and to entertain? And while I do not think there are any cut and dry answers to these large questions, I do think I have achieved more clarity in each of them. Documentary and verbatim theater is the ideal genre to study in order to arrive at these answers. Because it inherently walks the line between fact and fiction, its creators walk the line between journalist and artist, and its content walks the line between informing, enlightening and entertaining.

Ultimately, I do not believe there is a line between journalists and artists, except for, perhaps, in the eye of the beholder. Documentary and verbatim theater artists must be both artists and journalist in order to be successful; however, because of the social understanding of what a journalist is, documentary and verbatim playwrights are endowed with more social responsibility than traditional theater artists. With each piece of documentary and verbatim theater there is an unspoken contract between audience and playwright that says, “What I am about to see is, within the inevitable margin for human oversight and error, true.” When we sit down to watch a verbatim or documentary piece, we must trust that the people responsible for our experience of it have taken every reasonable precaution to ensure that it is, in essence, true. We also expect to be moved by verbatim and documentary theater. We expect to see something that, while true, is also poignant. This means that the documentary playwright cannot be just an artist or just a journalist. They must be both. They must use their journalist brain

to filter out the impulse to overwrite or to over-state and they must use their artist brain to ensure that the piece is still meaningful and still makes a statement, even if it is purely factual. Because of this, I think the two disciplines can and should learn from one another. What if university journalism students were required to take a theater or playwriting class or two as a part of their degree requirement? And what if playwriting students were required to take a journalism class or two? Documentary and verbatim playwrights could benefit from more traditional media ethics training, and journalists could benefit from engaging with more non-traditional storytelling forms and, potentially, learning to further engage with artistic empathy. The result could be more ethical and intuitive journalism and more trustworthy theater, both of which I think our country sorely needs right now and will likely continue to need in the future.

I also do not believe that the line between fact and fiction can ever truly be concrete. With any kind of storytelling comes human involvement and error. There is no such thing as true objectivity, but I think, perhaps, documentary and verbatim theater gives us a chance to stop regarding that as such a bad thing. Maybe, knowing that objectivity is impossible, we should lean into it a little bit and start telling stories from the perspectives of the people involved. Human-centric stories give us one facet of a larger picture, but, often, seeing that little slice of life gives us enough information to extrapolate the big picture. I think traditional journalism could benefit from this, as well. Of course, there will always be a need for the basic “who, what, when, where, how” stories, but, what if we invested more time and working hours into profiles, human interest and features? Documentary and verbatim theater is all about the people, so why can’t news be that way too?

Finally, throughout my research, I have discovered that documentary and verbatim theater can be purposeful and also ethical. Just because a piece is designed to make the audience think does not mean that it isn't also factual and responsible. *The Laramie Project* was criticized for becoming part of the national conversation about hate and LGBTQ+ rights even though some of its details were fuzzy. But does that mean that the piece, which has provoked so many important conversations and has ultimately done so much good, should be invalidated? I do not believe so. I do believe that there is a line between writing something to entertain and writing something to inform, and I also believe that documentary and verbatim theater exists somewhere in the middle of this dichotomy, right around the place where it instead exists to provoke action. If something is informative enough to make an audience feel enlightened, but is also entertaining and gripping enough to make an audience feel empathetic, they will, ideally, come out of the theater changed. They will know something they did not know before, but they will know it on a deeper, more human level than what can be exercised in print or on the front page of a newspaper, and, therefore, they will want to do something about it. Because of the two hours spent essentially being spoken to by people who have experienced something life-changing and significant, whether it was a positive or negative event, the audience will feel as if they are part of the story and they will want to ensure that their politics and social attitudes fall in line with the messages expressed in the show. That, I think, is the true power of documentary and verbatim theater. It is a vehicle for social change, and, if done correctly, it can be even more powerful and effective, while also, simply, telling a good story. A human story.

Too Foreign for Here

A Verbatim Play

by Kelsey Maureen Tidball

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

WOMAN 1

WOMAN 2

WOMAN 3

WOMAN 4

STRANGER

OFFICER

EMPLOYEE

MAN

OPENING

(WOMAN 1 stands USL, partially lit. she is mostly still but unmistakably invested. Another woman stands DSR. The audience should be able to almost touch her—she might be nearly uncomfortably close.)

(The first woman begins to sing “Will Ye Go, Lassie, Go?” Give it a few seconds. Lights up on WOMAN 3 DSR.)

(She stares out for a moment, as if recalling a distant memory. She opens her mouth to speak, waits, and then continues to listen to the music, turning this time to face the other woman.)

(She really does speak. She recites the first line as poetry, recalling it.)

So, here you are. Too foreign for home. Too foreign for here. Never enough for both.

Never enough for both. Never... you. Never quite. It just doesn't work like that. (Beat)

I think “Where are you from?” is one of the most stressful questions anyone could ever ask me. When people used to ask me that, “Where are you from?” I never knew the answer. “I'm not from anywhere, really,” I wanted to say because it was true, because it was starting to feel true. I used to think that I was from too many places to be from any one place, and that question, that stupid question, something about it demands a single answer. A sure answer.

But I think the more I see, the more I go, the more I'm *from* everywhere. I take little pieces of everywhere with me. And now the question “Where are you from?” isn't so bad because I can be from everywhere.

Yeats wrote about a tiny island he and his family used to visit every summer in Ireland. Innisfree. Every year, his mother would pick him up, take him out of school, pack him a bag, put him on a boat, and he'd go. They'd spend a week or so in Innisfree. And I think he felt like he was *from* there. He'd find his Innisfree every year. He'd found it countless times. But halfway through his life, he was back to looking for it. He'd lost it, I think. He'd forgotten what it was like to be in a place that was new, where he felt new... At age 50, he was back to looking for it... I thought I'd find it, too. A place where my mind was free and my body felt at rest, comfortable and I was me, I was enough. So I stood on a cliff and I looked out at the sea. I breathed in foreign air and spoke a foreign tongue. I drank. I danced. I walked until my feet were sore and my shoes were literally falling apart. I stared at beautiful and ancient things. Things of wonder and intense power and status. I went on in pursuit of *my* Innisfree... I don't think I found it. I don't know if I did. (Gestures around herself) This might already be

it, I'll never know. But I know we're always looking. I know I'll still be looking when I'm 55, 65, 105... I may never find it. Or I may find it and forget about it. Or I may find it and never know I've found it... But I'm from everywhere now. I am always too foreign for home, too foreign for here, and never enough for both. And now I think that *is* who I am. I am never enough for both. But I'm always enough to go.

(She joins the signing after a breath.)

Will ye go, Lassie, go? And we'll all go together, to glock wild mountain time all around the blooming heather. Will ye go, Lassie, go? Will ye go, Lassie, go? Will ye go, Lassie, go?

BEAT. LIGHTS OUT.

NEW SHOES

WOMAN 1:

I stood there and I looked out and I saw it and I thought “There it is...” There it is. I looked at it for a minute and I tried to ignore all of the people around me, all of the cameras and the chatter and the fact that it was too cold outside and I’d made the very purposeful decision to leave my raincoat at home and I tried to just... picture it. As it was. As I thought it would be. But then I looked down at my shoes for some reason because I don’t know I think I was worried that it would start raining and I thought “Well at least if it rains I wore my boots and not my tennis shoes,” and I realized they were scuffed at the toes and that the heel of my right boot was a little worn down. I thought, I’d never seen that before. I’d never noticed that before. I mean they were a brand new pair of shoes. And then I realized that apparently I must walk a little harder on my right side or something, and then I realized that every time I throw out a pair of shoes it’s because the right heel is worn down. I’d never noticed that before... And that’s like my body, you know? Like there’s nothing I can do really to fix it. Like maybe my hips are uneven and I was just born that way and now anytime I walk anywhere I’m thinking, “Better go easy on that right foot. You can’t afford new boots.” It’s really been pissing me off. Every right shoe I’ve ever owned, one out of every single pair, is being systematically destroyed just by virtue of me being who I am... and once the right one’s gone it’s not like I can just use the left one. It’s like a destructiveness that I can’t control. I’m ruining everything. By ruining one shoe, I ruin them both even though the other one is perfectly good... and it’s because I’m indescribably harsh. It’s because I never learned to play patty cake as a kid without hitting too hard and hurting the other kids’ hands—I, everything about me is weirdly hard lately. Violent and... and I’m standing here and I’m looking up at this thing and I’m seeing it there and I’m thinking this thing has been for 5 billion years. And it’s still here. It’s daring to stay, to exist. And it looks so strong and scary and it’s *here*. Immovable. Its violence is in refusing to leave, daring to stand up against all of those people and chatter and even the wind and the rain that I was so worried about. And I’ve been buying dozens of pairs of shoes every year because I can’t seem to stay anywhere. I just keep moving. I keep travelling. I keep running. And I’m doing it because I feel like I have to. Because I feel like it’s the most violent thing I can do right now. But it’s not... maybe if I didn’t walk so much, I could save some money on shoes.

YOU MUST BE SCARED

WOMAN 2:

“You must be scared,” he said to me, crossing his arms and lifting his eyebrows in that super skeptical and assertive “I’m a man” kinda way. Like all of a sudden he was aware of his height and he tried to like come to my level. Like in case I didn’t know he was really serious, he figured he ought to bend his knees and crane his neck and meet my eyes with that like sad and concerned scrunched up nose thing. And I knew exactly what he was thinking. His eyes gave it away. And then he said, “You know, aren’t you scared? There are lots of dangerous people over there.” My instinct was to ask him, “Where is ‘over there?’” but I didn’t really wanna hear what he had to say. He might as well have said, “You’re so pretty and frail! Aren’t you worried all those evil foreign men will outsmart you and whisk you away never to be seen again?” All men think they are Liam Neeson. That is something I learned early on. All men think they are Liam Neeson, and if they don’t already think they are Liam Neeson, they wish they could be. I used to date this guy who was in the Air Force. He was living halfway across the country and when I told him I was considering a study abroad trip to Argentina, he got all sullen and awkward. “I want you to reconsider that,” he said. “It’s dangerous,” he said. “You can’t go alone,” he said. “I will protect you,” he said. “I will make sure you know your place,” he said. “You can’t trust anyone,” he said. “Except for me,” he said. “You can’t go,” he said... and I realized that nothing would ever change. I realized that all the Liam Neesons and wannabe Liam Neesons of the world would always try to keep me from moving, from traveling, from broadening my horizons. Because we aren’t supposed to see stuff. Because the word is scary and threatening—and it is—but I’ll be damned if I let that stop me. So that’s what I told him. “I want to go,” I said. “I need to go,” I said. “I’m going to go,” I said. And we broke up. I guess I wouldn’t let him be my Liam Neeson. They don’t like that. He didn’t like that.

SNAPCHAT WORLD

(The scene is a narrow museum archway that leads into a long corridor. There is murmuring in the background. The doorway is invisible. The corridor is the audience.)

WOMAN 1: (stepping forward and pulling out phone) Oh wow... Look at this! (She pulls her friend forward by the arm)

WOMAN 2: Oh my gosh. This is stunning. (She also pulls out her phone and cranes her neck upwards)

WOMAN 3: (Coming from behind, phone already up and out) Wow... (She stops next to the 2 girls)

WOMAN 4: (Running into the wall of people now formed) Oh. Excuse me. (Pulling out phone and craning neck)

WOMAN 1: (to WOMAN 2) Would you take my picture? I'll stand here. (She stands there)

WOMAN 2: (looking at the photo) Oh my god, so cute! This is awesome. Wait. Hold on. Get me. (She hands off phone and poses)

WOMAN 4: (wanders in front of girls, phone still up)

WOMAN 1 & 2: (grumbling)

WOMAN 1: I'm sorry, ma'am. Excuse us.

WOMAN 4: Oh, I'm sorry! Go ahead. (Wanders in other direction, phone still up)

WOMAN 1: Oh, this is so good! Wait. Come a little closer. Look serious. Ugh, so cute!

WOMAN 2: Let me see!

WOMAN 1: Good right??

WOMAN: Yes, thank you so much!

WOMAN 3: (Trying to pass the girls, phone still out) Oh, excuse me.

WOMAN 2: So, we good to go?

WOMAN 1: Yeah, I think so. I don't think we really need to go in. It doesn't look like there's much in there.

WOMAN 2: Okay, cool. What's this place called again? (She's posting the photo)
(They walk off)

(WOMAN 3 comes out of the room and stops in the archway to stop her video and check her phone) (Long beat while WOMAN 4 comes back out of the room and wanders off, video still going, neck still craned.) (WOMAN 3 takes a breath, puts her phone in her pocket then goes off)

LIGHTS OUT

NOW NOW NOW

WOMAN 4:

Do you ever worry that you're just never going to do something if you don't do it right now? I sometimes feel like the sky is closing in on me. I wake up some mornings and I just can't shake the fact that God could get angry and shut us all down at any moment. And I don't even believe in god. I think the only way I could believe in god is if he did just end the whole world. But I'd be dead so it wouldn't even matter. I start thinking about my own mortality and I get freaked by the thought and then I get even more freaked because I'm thinking about my mortality at all and I know that I shouldn't be doing this. Not yet. Not now. Do you ever worry like that? I sometimes think that nobody but me thinks like that and that's why I do crazy stuff like taking off like this even though it doesn't make any sense. Even though it hurt you and I was gone too long and I didn't have any money and my parents were mad... I'm sorry I did it. I'm sorry I left. God, well, no, no I'm not sorry I did it. I had to do it. I had to because if I hadn't just made it happen, if I hadn't just left and travelled and seen things I had never seen before, I could have never done it. I could've just been here, with you, in this place, forever. I'm not sorry at all. It was exactly what I needed... but I am sorry it hurt you. It shouldn't have. I wish it hadn't. I wish you'd just supported me. But you couldn't. And for that I am so, so, sorry.

STRANGERS ON A PLANE

WOMAN 1:

People don't know how to act when they're alone among strangers and they're scared... I was on this flight once—I think it was an international flight—I was flying between Paris and Dublin on my way back to the states and I sat next to this couple. They were French, speaking French, and the woman was clearly talking excessively, chattering—it seemed like to just fill the silence—and he was clearly nervous. He was like rubbing the inside edge of his thumb with his pointer finger like people do when they're stressed out and he was making my seat shake, bouncing his knee up and down. He was responding to her every few sentences. “Oui.” “Je pense.” “Oui.” “C'est vrai.” But he kept looking out the window and fidgeting. Taking the safety card out of the pocket, opening it, and putting it right back in. Like he wanted to read it but he didn't really want to read it. Scratching his knee. Playing with his watch. We took off and I remember thinking that he was going to fidget out of his seat, like he wasn't going to make it. But then, just as the wheels made that little (*noise*) noise and my stomach dropped like I was on a roller coaster, she grabbed his hand and slammed it against his own knee. It was oddly forceful but not cruel, not driven by irritation or anything. Intimate. And I thought, “They must do this all the time.” I thought, “This is how they live. He gets nervous, she calms him down, she gets nervous, he calms her down...” and it wasn't adoring or especially tender or sweet or anything. It was necessary. Practiced. They had done it a million times and planned to do it a million more. (breath – beat) I don't want to travel alone... I don't want to have to pretend like I don't think we're all gonna die when the plane takes off. I want someone to stop me from scratching the inside of my thumbs raw just by laying their hand on mine. (holds both hands up to audience, thumbs out) For now, I have eternally raw thumbs. Because life is hard. And I do a lot of pretending... And I ride on a lot of airplanes. (Maybe a tiny laugh or smile) (Beat) (Turn to look at thumbs) It's a feature I'm learning to love.

WHAT ARE YOU SCARED OF?

(The women are sitting on the floor of a hostel room. It is late at night. They've been drinking.)

WOMAN 3: What are you scared of?

WOMAN 4: What am I scared of?

W3: Yes. I want to know what you're scared of. I just want to, I don't know, check it against what I'm scared of, I guess.

W4: I'm scared of everything. I actually don't think I can name one thing I'm not scared of right now.

W3: (Pause) Hm. Me too. Me neither.

W4: (Breath) I think I thought I'd feel differently after this trip.

W3: Really? Whattya mean?

W4: I just--I think I thought I'd have clarity or something... I still have no idea what I'm doing--here or otherwise--it's frustrating. I'm worried I wasted my time coming here. I just thought it would all be much more... revelatory.

W3: I don't know. I don't think it has to be. Or, I guess, if it is revelatory, we may not know it yet.

W4: I just think I'm too in my head. I feel like I'm expecting everything to mean more than it does, so I come home disappointed every night. I just haven't had the kinds of moments, like, big, significant moments, that you're supposed to have when you travel, ya know?

W3: Yeah, I do. I do think you're too in your head though. You can't enjoy it if you're judging it the whole time.

W4: I know. This just feels so significant to me. It feels like everything I've done for the past four years is culminating in this. Like it's what I've fought for. I just really want to have the moments. Just one. Just some kind of clarity.

W3: (Long pause) I think you will. I think you have to. I think you will.

(They both fall silent. One reaches for her journal, the other for her cell phone.)
LIGHTS OUT.

THE CITY OF WAIT

WOMAN 2:

It took me years to recover from the city of “wait.”

The city of “Not you, not yet.”

It took me years to recover from certainty

From the consistency of sunshine

From the windows always feeling warm to the back of my hand.

But not exactly warm.

Tepid. Meek.

Waiting between winter and wet.

“Wait,” the crosswalk would signal to me

And I did.

“Wait,” I would say to others.

The traffic waits.

The weather waits.

Why shouldn’t we wait too?

I found the city of “Go forth,” of Innisfree

And I found it in my brain.

I found it in opening my mouth to sing again

After it had been so long.

I found it in lifting my foot to stomp again

Dancing. Jumping.

Through the stagnation, moving.

I no longer wait.

I can't.

I won't.

Everything moves too fast for waiting, now.

My about-face showed me my own face,

My own mind, my own body, my own words.

And they are all in motion,

In remission.

Becoming a being that moves

Is the hardest thing you can do.

And here I am.

Moving.

Running.

Writing. Flying.

Dancing. Making noise.

Moving, moving, moving, moving.

IT'S NOT MY FAULT

(The scene is a hotel room in Switzerland. W4 is alone, on the phone, waiting for the takeout food she just ordered from the restaurant downstairs.)

W4: (on the phone) Yeah, yeah, I got here okay. I'm exhausted though. I feel like if I don't ever see another train in my life I won't be totally upset. Yeah. Yeah. It's beautiful. It's dark right now--or almost dark-- but I'll get out tomorrow for a little bit. It's a quick stop. Yeah! I just ordered from downstairs. You're right -- it smelled amazing. Oh my god, it's been so long since I've actually had anything that smelled amazing. I mean, the food has been good, but it's definitely not what I want all the time. Yeah, yeah. I'm excited... I'm happy. It's been good.

(There is an aggressive knock on the door)

W4: (Opening the door a sliver) Oh, hi. Hold on just one second. (She puts her phone down on the bed, keeping the door open with her foot, grabbing her wallet) Thank you. This is perfect.

Man: (He puts his hand on the door, opening it a little wider, handing her the food) Well, hi.

W4: (She rifles through her wallet, looking for the right currency)

Man: So, um, how are you tonight?

W4: (Still rifling) Oh, I'm okay. Thanks. How are you?

Man: Good, good. (He pushes the door open further) So, um, where are you from?

W4: Oh, um, the U.S.

Man: No, I mean, where are you from?

W4: Originally? Uh, Kansas. Lawrence.

Man: Oh. My grandmother lives there.

W4: Nice. Great. (She's found the right currency but is now counting out a tip. The coins are unfamiliar and confusing.)

Man: Are you here alone?

W4: (Taken aback. She is alone, of course, but scrambles to not tell him that) Oh, uh, no. I'm here with a few people. (She's kind of afraid now) They went across the street tonight, but, um, I stayed here.

Man: Oh, what happened? (He opens the door a little more)

W4: Oh, nothing. (She pushes the door shut a little more, paying him and taking the food) I felt kinda sick. (Quickly) Okay, well, thank you. Goodnight. (She closes the door)

Man: (He stops it with his hand) Hey, would you like to grab a coffee while you're here? How long are you here anyways?

W4: Oh. No. I don't think so. I'm only here for a little bit and my friends will be coming back soon.

Man: Really? Are you sure? I thought maybe I could show you around. I thought maybe you would want to go out.

W4: (Deliberate) No. Thank you, but no. I do not want to go out with you. My friends will be back any minute. I want you to leave.

Man: Okay. Okay. I'm sorry. I understand.

W4: (Immediately trying to close the door.)

Man: Wai--wai-- (as door closes)

W4: (gets back on phone, scared but hiding it) Oh, that was nothing. Just the delivery guy. He wanted to talk. I-It's fine. No, no, I'm okay. No really, dad. it's fine. Okay. Love you too. (She hangs up)

(There is another knock on the door, more forceful this time)

Man: (Through door) Hey! I'm sorry! I just wanted to apologize and maybe make up for it. Can you open the door? I just want to say it to your face!

W4: It's okay, really. No need to say it to my face. Now, please leave.

Man: Wait, are you still mad? It seems like I came back up here to apologize and now you're not accepting it.

W4: No, I am accepting it. I appreciate it. It's fine. Now please leave.

Man: (pause) Here's the thing though. You still seem mad. Let me grab you a coffee to make up for it? Maybe a drink?

W4: No. No, thank you. I do not need anything. I want you to leave me alone.

Man: (knocking with both hands) Come on, I'm sorry! Open the door! Come on, come on, come on!

W4: (grabbing phone to call the police) Hi, I'm at The Linnea and there's a man outside my hotel room and he won't leave me alone. I'm on the 5th floor. 504. I don't know if I should be calling you or not, but-- (operator responds) Okay. Thank you. Tack.

Man: (still knocking) Are you upset? Who are you talking to? (Now a little angry) Come on! I didn't mean anything by it! Just open the door and we can solve this!

W4: (quiet) No. Please go away. I called the police. They're--

Man: (suddenly very angry) Hey! Look, I didn't mean any of it. I just wanted to have some coffee. Why did you do that? Open the door! OPEN THE DOOR!

W4: (takes out phone, ready to call again. She sits on the bed as the Man continues to knock, pound and make comments, devolving into more and more profanity and more and more anger)

Police: Mademoiselle! Es-tu celui qui nous a appelé? (knocking) Miss! Are you the one who called? Do not open the door. We will take him away.

W4: Yes! Oui! Thank you.

Man: Hey, look, I didn't mean anything by it. I didn't mean anything by it!

Police: Sir, stay still.

Man: Hey, hands off! Hey, look. It's not my fault that she's traveling alone! It's not my fault that she's traveling alone! (moving down the hall) She should have known better!

(Silence. 2 beats.)

W4: (Reaches in her pocket for her phone. Dials. Maybe some tears.) Hi, dad? Hi. Yeah, yeah. I'm just feeling kinda frazzled. I'm alone. Um. (sigh) I just wanna come home, I think.

BEAT. LIGHTS OUT.

I HATE THE THEATER

(WOMAN 2 enters and sits in a chair in the center of the stage. The “orchestra” begins warming up. She sits in silence for a few moments, but she looks antsy. Her feet might be shaking or she might be fiddling with her hair or jewelry. The lights start to fade and the orchestra begins to play something with more form. As they do...)

WOMAN 2:

(Quietly panicked with increasing anxiety and self-loathing) I really hate the theater. Or, I guess I probably like the theater but my body hates the theater so it's hard for me to really say that I like the theater. I feel so trapped in here. And I know it's irrational and I know I should just enjoy myself, but they're turning out the lights and there are hundreds of people around me and my brain is screaming and I feel like screaming and the more I think about it the worse it gets. The ceiling is gold and those little cherub things are looking at me and any other fuckign normal human would love that, I mean they would think it's cute or expensive or something or both, but of course I start thinking about how it's just a couple more pairs of eyes and every cherub means another 20 minutes of this play. Twelve cherubs means twelve hours and I just can not do that. I hate that I do this. Why do I do this? Why do I panic? Goddammit I can't keep doing this. Come on, focus on the stage. It's fucking beautiful what I'm seeing here and look at everyone else (she looks around at other faces) they are loving it. They are enthralled. They are how you're supposed to be. Fuck, I'm in this beautiful theater and I'm in London and these tickets were so expensive and I knew I shouldn't have come, I knew it. I knew this was going to happen. I can't breathe. I can't breathe and I'm dizzy and I'm crying and everyone is going to think I'm crazy. I feel crazy. Fuck I hate the theater. I need to get out of here. (Big, long, trained breath) Okay. Okay. Okay, fuck. (Takes a minute to listen to the music. Lights flash across her face. She breathes through it and closes her eyes. It seems like she's going to be fine and then..) Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck! (Abruptly gets up out of her seat with the clatter and then runs off. The music and the lights play for 2 moments longer then stop.)

LIGHTS OUT.

PHONE BIRDS

(WOMAN 1 sits on a bed, phone to her ear. She's waiting for someone to answer.)

WOMAN 1:

Hi. Yeah, hi. Or, I guess I should say, "Top o' the mornin' to ya!" (laugh) Yeah, yeah, I'm still in Ireland... Is it even morning? There? Is it morning there? I have completely lost track of all of that. (Pause) Oh my gosh, really? It's like 10:00 here. (Pause) Yeah, yeah, we have a free night. Or, I guess I've chosen to have a free night so I could just chill here and talk to you and decompress a little bit. (Pause) Oh, no, I wanted to talk to you. I really wanted to talk to you. I--oh, no, you go ahead. (Pauses to listen, smiles) Thank you, Aaron. Thank you so much. (Long-ish pause) Hey. Thank you for hanging in there with me during all of this. I know it can't be easy for you to have me here. I mean, I know, I know. I just--I wanted to thank you anyway. I--I'm very happy you're here. I mean I'm happy you're talking to me. I'm happy you're with me right now. (Pause) Anyways, how is your afternoon going? (Pause) Oh, that's great. Yeah, I went to the Irish Whiskey Museum today. Yeah, I tried some whiskey. (Laughs) I don't think whiskey is really my thing. (Pause) Well, yeah, I guess you're right, alcohol isn't really my thing, period. It was cool though. There's so much of their history all wrapped up in all that. (Laughs) Yeah, but I kind of love it here, too. It's so simple. It's just happy here. Like people all talk to each other and sing and dance all the time. I don't know, it feels really free. (Pause) Oh! Your postcard is in the mail. With any luck it will be there before I get to France. You'll like it. It's a nice one. I know I've been talking to you pretty much every day, but I just thought it might be nice to have a souvenir of sorts. I'll be happy for you to have them too. (Pause) Okay, well good. And okay. I should probably get to bed now anyway, too. Or I guess I could go out with everyone. I'm sure they're doing something. I'm just so tired. It's strange, but the longer I'm here, the more tired I get. (Pause) Yeah, it's kind of crazy. It feels like I've been awake for days. (Pause to listen) Okay, yeah. Yeah, definitely. (Somewhat abruptly) Hey, Aaron? I miss you. I wish you were here with me. I feel like all of this would be so much easier if you were here. (Pauses to listen, slowly smiling) Good. Okay, goodnight. You too. Goodnight.

BEAT. LIGHTS OUT.

O'HARE ISSUES

(The scene is an airport. On stage is a help desk with a woman standing behind it.)

WOMAN 3: (Runs on from SR in a panic) Hi. I need to check in. Flight 163 to Portland.

EMPLOYEE: Okay... (Looks at her computer, types a little bit.) Oh, um, I'm sorry but that flight leaves in just about an hour. I can't let you in right now. There's not enough time.

WOMAN 3: What?

EMPLOYEE: Um, you would have to go through customs and we just don't let anybody through with just an hour to go.

WOMAN 3: I'm sorry, what can I do? The flight leaves in an hour, you said?

EMPLOYEE: Yes. I can... (Back to computer) I can get you on a flight out tomorrow morning at 7:00 a.m.

WOMAN 3: Wait, I really can't go through? I don't understand. I bought these tickets together. I--I'm coming from Ireland. There aren't any flights tonight?

EMPLOYEE: No, I'm sorry.

WOMAN 3: I--I don't have anywhere to stay. Okay. Okay. Um, can I sleep in the airport? Does it, like, close? How does that work? I have nowhere to stay.

EMPLOYEE: No, it doesn't close. You can sleep wherever you'd like. I'd suggest going through security now and sleeping inside the terminal tonight.

WOMAN 3: (Breath) Okay. Okay. (Pause) Now?

EMPLOYEE: Yes. You are more than welcome to go through customs and security now, Aaaaand... here's your new ticket (She hands it over)

WOMAN 3: Okay. Okay, thank you. Okay. (She steps away from the counter, looking on the verge of tears. She steps off to the side and pulls out her phone) Hi, mom? I'm stuck in Chicago. They're not gonna let me through. I'm gonna miss my plane... Yeah. (starting to cry, getting progressively more upset and frantic) Yeah. I--I'm gonna get on a flight tomorrow morning at 7. She gave me a ticket. I--(looking at ticket) I have to fly through San Francisco. I'll land in Portland at 1:32. (pause) Oh, god, I am so tired, Mom. I woke up at like 4:00am this morning. I haven't eaten anything. I don't have any more money or a change of clothes or anything. I am so, so tired! (pause) Okay. Okay. I

don't know. I've never done this before, mom. Things were not supposed to be like this. I was supposed to be home tonight. I--Ugh, I feel like I'm unravelling. (pause) I know. I know it is. (with a little too much drama for the situation) It doesn't feel okay! But it doesn't feel okay, mom. It feels really, really bad. I am so tired! I don't want to sleep in the airport, mom. I don't even know what that looks like. I don't have a blanket or a toothbrush and all I've eaten all day is this bag of madeleines that I bought for a gift for you guys... I'm sitting here in the middle of the airport, crying and talking to my mom on the phone and I'm eating your gift and it's just the worst.

LIGHTS OUT.

SOLITUDE

WOMAN 4:

We all parted ways and it was like the first time I felt alone in weeks because we had been in each others company for weeks. And this was the first time that I was *alone*, alone, alone. I went out--my aunt lived in Paris for a few years out of college and she had sent me a list of all the different things that I had to go see in Paris and things in her old neighborhood and I went and got my metro card in the morning and I went out for the whole day and I went to Pere Lachaise and I went to these gardens that were part of a museum and the gardens were blooming and everyone was out with their families and their girlfriends and the sun was shining through the trees and I went into some of these old roman ruins that were supposed to be really cool but they were actually just like a park. And, uh, um, I went to this--there was this place--the big mosque and it was supposed to be really cool--and it was really cool--but it was also, like, totally commercialized. Like you had to pay to get in you couldn't just go in so that was kinda interesting. And I have this memory. I bought carrots at the grocery store. Like whole carrots, because I was like "That's something I know. That looks familiar. I can eat that." And I have this memory of sitting on the metro with the big carrot bag and my big water bottle and my snacks and I was just sitting on the metro like (chomp sound), chomping this giant carrot, like, "Hello. Here I am. Alone in Paris. Chomping my carrots."

I am not someone who likes being alone. I don't think I would say that about myself. But what was so special about being alone in Paris was, um, it solidified the feeling of being independent. And, larger than that, I think, I'm someone who cares a lot about being perceived as and proving to myself that I'm competent. And a huge part of travel is being competent at traveling. People who think that you just show up and good shit happens to you have other people fixing their problems for them. It was this feeling of, like, I don't speak french but I can get there, I can read the map, I can handle my own shit and I took care of my own food and I'm gonna get home on time and I'm gonna see everything I need to see. It was a big feeling of, like, I don't need the external support. I can do this on my own. I am my own person who is perfectly capable of doing this. And I'm out. On my own. I remember that feeling of feeling like "Wow. I can do it." I am out on my own and I am living my life and there's no one else helping me do it. People talk about traveling to "find themselves" and maybe that's what they mean. Pushing their limits. Finding out what they're capable of--I hate the clichés of it--but yeah. I was sitting there. On the metro. Munching my carrots. And all of a sudden, I got it. I felt like I had found something I

didn't know I was looking for. I felt at home. That... Yeah, that was my favorite moment.

BEAT. LIGHTS OUT.

SHAKESPEARE IN THE SKY WITH DIAMONDS

(The scene is The Globe theatre in London. Two women enter, STRANGER with a book in her hand, WOMAN 3 with a camera, looking up and taking photos.

STRANGER goes to the center of the stage and stops, staying standing but taking out her book. WOMAN 3 wanders around the stage, moving as if she's dodging around a crowd of people. She eventually stops, settling in right next to STRANGER.)

WOMAN 3: (bumping shoulders with STRANGER) Ope. Sorry. So sorry.

STRANGER: Oh, it's okay. (going back to her book)

WOMAN 3: This is so cool.

STRANGER: (looking up slightly) Huh. Yes. It is really cool.

WOMAN 3: I mean, like, it feels so surreal that I'm here. I mean, this is Shakespeare's Globe.

STRANGER: (smiles)

WOMAN 3: (invasive but friendly) Have you ever been here before?

STRANGER: (closing book) Yeah. Yeah I have. I actually come as often as I can.

WOMAN 3: Whoa, really? So, like, how often?

STRANGER: Well, the shows change up every few weeks, so I try to catch all of them. If I can.

WOMAN 3: Really? Wow. Wow, wow. I'm sitting here, like, so amazed and you just get to come here, like, all the time?

STRANGER: (laughs) Yes, I guess so.

(Beat.)

WOMAN 3: What--what's been your favorite thing that you've seen here?

STRANGER: Well... They did a production of Taming of the Shrew in 2016 that was set in Ireland... It was really amazing. Powerful. I love Taming of the Shrew.

WOMAN 3: Do you love Taming of the Shrew? Wow. That's really neat.

STRANGER: Yeah, I do. It was... I think Cate is such a fascinating feminist character. I've always wanted to play her. I've always wanted to direct the show.

WOMAN 3: Oh are you a director?

STRANGER: Yes. I work at a little theater on the outskirts of the city. It's nothing like the stuff here though. I--I like to come here whenever I can.

WOMAN 3: Oh I don't blame you at all. I--I just can't believe that you come here, like, all the time though. It's like so amazing that I'm here at all and you're just, like, here every other weekend and you brought your book and it's just so crazy. I'm--I'm so sorry. I don't mean to be annoying or anything, I just--What is it like to live here?

STRANGER: Well, I guess it's just like living anywhere else really. (pause) I guess we all just appreciate the things that are foreign to us. It's--It's kinda like how most of us are crueler to our moms and our husbands and our best friends... We are nice as hell to the bus-driver and the concierge but we unleash it all--all the ugliest bits--on our family and friends... I guess I just take advantage of it now. Or, I guess I take it for granted now. I'm too familiar.

WOMAN 3: Huh. Yeah... Yeah, I guess that's true... Gosh, I'm just so excited for this though.

STRANGER: (looking up at the stage, for real this time) Yeah, yeah. I am too. Ya know--

WOMAN 3: (simultaneously) I can't wait to see what they do with--

STRANGER: Oh, sorry--

WOMAN 3: No, go ahead--

STRANGER: Oh it's just that--I think I'm going to put the book away. Pretend I'm a tourist. Do you mind if I stand by you to watch the show?

WOMAN 3: Oh gosh no, not at all.

STRANGER: Thank you. (she rifles in the bag, putting the book away and putting on her glasses) I'm Catherine. (She extends her hand)

WOMAN 3: I'm Katie. Katherine, too. But Katie. Really. (She also extends her hand. They shake and both laugh at the coincidence.)

STRANGER: (smiling) It's great to meet you, Katie. Thank you.

(The lights start to go down - the show is about to start.)

WOMAN 3: (with excitement) God, I love the theater.

STRANGER: (smiling) Me too.

BEAT. LIGHTS.

PHONE... SOMETHINGS

WOMAN 3:

(On phone. It's the middle of the conversation.) Well, yeah... I mean, sure I'm having fun. Of course I'm having fun. (Pause to listen, kind of annoyed) I'm having as much fun as I want to, Sam. Sam. Wai--Wai--Hold on. Sam. SAM. Jesus, I'm having as much fun as I can. As much as I want. What is wrong with you? (Pauses to listen, but he doesn't say anything.) Sam? God, what is wrong now? Sam. I... I can't read your mind, here. I... I just--(sighs, pauses, then bucks up, tries her best) We saw the Eiffel Tower today. We walked all the way up it. They tried to take my carabiner before I could go up. (Attempts to laugh and get him laughing) I was really pissed and I couldn't explain anything to them. It was like they had never seen one before. I was so frustrated. (Pauses for reaction. Nothing.) Sam? Where'd ya go? (Pause to listen) Okay. Do you wanna talk about it? (Pauses to listen for a long time. Turns out he does want to talk about it, but she doesn't like whatever it is) Okay. I'm sorry about that--Are you--Are you sleeping or anything? I--I don't know, Sam, I'm just trying to help you. Come on, stop, please. I am just here to help you. I--I hate it when you talk to me like that. Sam. (Long pause) I've gotta go. Okay? I--I'm really tired. It's been a long day. (Pause) Okay. Yeah. Yeah, goodnight. Yeah. Bye.

BEAT. LIGHTS.

MORNING RUN

(The stage is empty. WOMAN 1 runs onto the stage, exercise clothes and tennis shoes on. Headphones in ears. She has been on a jog. She is running a little faster than jog pace. She runs around the stage a little bit, head up, noticing things but obviously distracted. She runs to a corner then stops, looking up and putting her hands on her hips to breathe. She is now alone.)

(She looks up.)

(She smiles.)

(She's still breathing hard.)

(She makes a decision.)

(She screams. It isn't scary or stressful, just a long release.)

(The scream gives way to laughter. Not manic. Just happy and free.)

(The laughter gives way to breathing.)

(She works her way through it all, then takes one more look and spins around, then goes off again, this time at a regular jogging pace.)

LIGHTS OUT.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD

WOMAN 2:

The outside world is great. Like, it's a really great thing to have and to see and to be a part of. I think I sometimes forget that there's a whole world outside my apartment. Like, I know there is but I forget to think about it. I forget to widen my brain enough to keep it in mind. And then sometimes I go on runs and I pass all the houses and I think, "Oh. I've actually never seen that one before." Or I pass by the daycare on my street or I see all the families through their windows who are, like, all having dinner together with the blinds open and I think, "Holy crap. Every one of these people has a life. Like a full life. And maybe they cried today or maybe they didn't and maybe they wanted to and, and then I wonder how many of them forget to think about how I have a life. Just like, four doors down. In my apartment. Stacked up on top of a whole bunch of other people who also all have lives... And I know you're laughing at me and you're like, you just said "The outside world is a great thing," but, IIII don't know. Sometimes I forget. And I think maybe when you travel you... can't. Like if you forget about the outside world than you have no idea where you are and you're gonna die. It's all outside. It's all the world. It's all the water sans fish or the you're the fish sans water or whatever. I think that's why I love it so much. It's like survival instinct. If you're travelling and your brain and your perspective aren't at least twice the size of what they were before, then you are not going to survive. That's why I say the outside world is so great. I need it. I'm happier when I remember it. I'm happier when I have it. And travelling is like having it shoved in your face. It can't possibly be ignored, and I just think that's awesome and amazing and I need more of it, whenever I can. I wish I could bring that kind of... awareness back with me, but I guess that's the next step, huh?

BEAT. LIGHTS.

SO... WHAT NOW?

(All four women come onto the stage. They are carrying bags and backpacks. WOMAN 3 is toting a suitcase twice her size. She stops a little short and the rest of the group stops with her, except WOMAN 4 who stands aside to send a text.)

WOMAN 1: Got everything?

WOMAN 3: I hope so.

WOMAN 2: I always feel like I'm forgetting something. I keep obsessively touching my pocket to make sure I have my passport.

WOMAN 4: (walking up to the group) Everyone ready to go?

WOMAN 1: I think so. (Pause) God, this is weird isn't it?

WOMAN 2: Leaving?

WOMAN 1: Yeah. Everything just went by so quickly.

WOMAN 3: Yeah. (Pause) So... What now?

(All of the women pause, smile, shake their heads, etc. then sit/rest on their suitcases. Long pause.)

WOMAN 2: Ya know, everyone has their shit don't they?

WOMAN 1: (Kinda laughing) Who, us?

WOMAN 2: Well, yeah, not just people but, like, entire nations, entire countries. Like, everyone has done awful things and every country has done awful things. You know what I mean? Everybody has fucked up, and I guess the defining moment is how you deal with that kind of history.

WOMAN 4: Yeah. (kind of surprised, but agreeing) That's true.

WOMAN 3: God, and everyone just thinks that they're the center of the universe. We are so self-centered. It doesn't matter what country you're from, it--I just realize that we are all so connected and I just realize how selfish we are. Being here has made me realize that.

WOMAN 1: Yeah. (Pause) I'm sad. (Smiling melancholy throughout) It's like, I'm so ready to go home but I also don't wanna leave. I just--I wish I--I wish we could have more time. For all of it. For every chapter. It just is going by so quickly. And we have all these crazy--crazy huge thoughts about the world and ourselves and then it's just... over. I'm feeling kind of stuck, I think. Like, if I don't move from this exact spot, then nothing can be over and nothing new can begin and I can just float, like, somewhere in the middle. (Takes a deep breath as if to drink in all the foreign air she can.) Too foreign for home, too foreign for here.

WOMAN 4: You can't stay like that though. None of us can. We've got to move forward.

WOMAN 1: (through smiling tears) I know. Come here, guys. (She drops her bags and reaches out, calling the girls in to a group hug.)

(All of the WOMEN drop their bags. WOMAN 3's suitcase tips over and she has to dive back down to grab it. Everyone laughs. Then they hug, like a soccer team warming up on the field. WOMAN 1 starts to hum the first few lines of "Will Ye Go, Lassie, Go." The other join in, quietly, messily, until, one by one, they fade out. They stay in the hug as the lights go down.)

BLACKOUT

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